Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12267
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12267

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

What If We Ran Our Own Show? GenAI and The Politics of Representation

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Submitted: 26 February 2026 **Accepted:** 25 May 2026 **Published:** 2 July 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Gender Politics and Moral Norms Across Media" edited by Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Zhen Ye (Meiji University), and Qian Huang (University of Groningen), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i505

Abstract

This article examines the politics of representation in the face of today's growing audience fragmentation and the entry of genAI tools into televisual entertainment. Establishing that contemporary TV content is shaped by normative discourses on how to represent social difference, the article highlights how text-to-image/video models accelerate and amplify their mark on user-generated content. Conducting a walkthrough exploration of Showrunner—a genAI-powered tool to generate short, animated scenes with—it demonstrates how such models operationalize dominant constructions of how to appropriately represent social differences like gender, race, or sexuality. This brings a key tension into focus: Today's broad recognition of representation's political salience translates into functionalism and instrumentalization. By working to discontinue "inappropriate portrayals," contemporary representational politics ignore pop-cultural complexity in favor of "actionable" dichotomies meant to regulate "harmful content" out of existence.

Keywords

diversity; genAI; politics of representation; television; text-to-video

1. Introduction

This theoretical article examines Hall's politics of representation (1997) in the face of contemporary pop-cultural shifts. Against the backdrop of generative artificial intelligence's (genAI) entry to popular mediascapes (Harding & Wagner, 2025), it highlights how technologically driven audience fragmentation and content personalization (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022) coincide with a proliferation and consolidation of normative discourses on *who* and *how* to represent (Vanlee, 2024). This, the article argues, makes

representing social difference an increasingly deliberate process, couched in functionalist assumptions about popular culture's interplay with societal power relations.

On the one hand, progressing from linear broadcasting to video-on-demand (VoD) distribution and, recently, genAI-based text-to-video tools, steadily attunes content to viewers' personal expectations and norms (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022). Moving from one-to-many distribution (Williams, 2004) to platformed narrowcasting (Monaghan, 2024) and, ultimately, prompt-based user-generated content (Gillespie, 2024) solidifies viewers' ability to consume content that resonates with their own dispositions. Concurrently, debates on *whose* stories should be told and *how* these narrations construe their identities have intensified too (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024). These slippages of representational politics into popular discourse (Saha, 2021) turn texts' portrayal of social differences like gender, race, or sexuality into key evaluative focal points (Warner, 2017, pp. 32–34)—producing vernacular, contingent dichotomies of "good" and "bad" representation. Together, these two trends functionalize Hall's (1997) politics of representation. If Hall's formulation refers to a critical "struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished" (Hall, 1997, p. 277), today's mainstream embrace of representational critique engenders distinctly instrumental assumptions about it. As representation becomes an active and purposeful consideration across the entanglements of media production, text, and reception (Vanlee, 2024), its popularly articulated politics have grown preoccupied with fixing "bad" portrayals.

To bring this shift into focus, we draw on the notion of *alignment* (Hristova et al., 2025). Alignment denotes measures to steer genAI models towards intended purposes (Hristova et al., 2025, p. 1439), like building in guardrails to prevent them from generating offensive output (Baron, 2025). In a computational context, alignment turns cultural sensibilities into technical procedures (Hristova et al., 2025, p. 1440); it attunes algorithmic operations to human values (Curry et al., 2025). For text-to-video models, like OpenAI's Sora or Google's Veo3, this means trying to make outputs reflect specific expectations about representation (Warner, 2017, p. 32). Through various means and for various reasons, genAI applications are developed and trained to generate particular imagery (Jan et al., 2025). Most are built to not reproduce harmful or offensive tropes (Baron, 2025), but other models' design disregards the need to "represent responsibly" (Ferrara, 2024). So, here, alignment entails transforming discursive constructs of "good" and "bad" representation into algorithmic protocols that reliably attune outputs to these norms. Pursuing alignment is in this sense not endemic to developing "responsible" text-to-video models. Rather, it is a continuation of ongoing logics that align popular content with specific expectations on how (not) to represent social difference.

With a case study of Showrunner, a genAI-powered platform that provides aesthetically distinct worlds ("storyworlds") to develop user-prompted micro-narrative content on, the article explores how aligning text-to-video models explicates the fuzzy processes by which representational norms seep into popular texts. With a contextualized walkthrough (Light et al., 2018), the article establishes how such tools consolidate normative constructs of "proper representation" as moral imperatives advocating the neutralization of terms and tropes considered harmful. But by construing problematic representation as fixable—through the deescalation of terms, tropes, and interactions reminiscent of sexism, racism, and homophobia—Showrunner implicitly deprives those subjected to such injustices of "the means to shape their story." Such takes on pop culture's entanglement with societal power relations exemplify how contemporary engagements with representation are less a substantial "struggle over meaning" (Hall, 1997, p. 277) and more procedural consolidations of expectations and norms on *who* and *how* to represent.

This, the article argues, is not so much a limitation of text-to-video models as it is an indication of the functionalism that marks popular discourse on representation. Mainstream enactments of representational politics (Saha, 2021, p. 177) produce "actionable" discourses (Warner, 2017)—articulating needs to be fulfilled (e.g., *increase* asexual stories/characters—e.g., Brandley & LeMaster, 2025) and demands to be met (e.g., *avoid* bisexual stereotypes—e.g., McCole & Anderson, 2026). Although representation is unstable and open-ended (Hall, 1997) and resists conscious attempts at "improvement" (Kellner, 2005), today's efforts to "align" social realities' popular portrayal require us to develop alternative ways to critically engage representation. To articulate a politics attentive to the paradoxical shifts that mark contemporary popular culture, the article concludes, we must think through the processes that reconfigure cultural critique into seemingly actionable solutions meant to fix problematic representation.

2. Television, Individualization, and the Politics of Representation

Popular entertainment media like TV series never provide a "neutral" image of social reality (Hermes, 2023). Society is interpreted before it is televised, and texts meant as "mere amusement" are marked by political conditions (Hall, 1997). Series and shows establish what defines "us" and what to think of "them" (Hermes, 2023) through "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Lechner & Kohlenberger, 2022, p. 116). So, television content is deeply political. It constantly affirms and/or subverts normality's boundaries (Toynbee, 2006). Representations of social difference—like gender, race, sexuality, or dis/ability—are therefore never unambiguously "harmful" or "beneficial" (Kellner, 2005). Instead, popular texts refract hegemonic struggle in who or what they portray (Hall, 1997). TV depictions of women or racialized minorities, for instance, enter complex relationships with the real-world conditions they face. Just as a single female character articulates paradoxical sentiments on sanctioned femininity (e.g., Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022), stories on diasporic communities construe conflicting meanings about them (Mediavilla Aboulaoula, 2025).

This makes it analytically shallow to distinguish "positive" from "negative" representations (Saha, 2021, p. 177). As cultural artefacts, televisual texts allow us to deconstruct "what goes without saying" about our social environment, and unpack inequities these self-evidences hold and sustain (Morley, 2012). As Hall (1997) notes, fostering critical awareness of popular texts' entanglement with societal power relations informs a conceptually grounded *politics of representation* (p. 277). This is not concerned with parsing "good" from "bad" representations; it enacts hegemonic struggle over commonsensical meanings through continual processes of resignification (Hall, 1997, pp. 269–277). So critiquing series' reification of exclusionary discourses (e.g., of diasporic Muslim women—Mediavilla Aboulaoula, 2025) or unpacking their validation of marginalized identities (e.g., non-binary individuals—Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025) never boils down to disavowing or encouraging certain representational practices. It is about figuring out how portraying difference is couched in broader societal structures and attempting to reconfigure them. In Kellner's words (2005), critical engagements with representation are multiperspectival (p. 43), and forward a media pedagogy that "can empower people to gain *sovereignty* over their culture" (p. 44, our emphasis).

Sovereignty, in Kellner's sense (2005), refers to individuals' ability to *participate* culturally; it envisions people *shaping* their culture inasmuch as they consume it. This sovereignty has therefore not necessarily been brought by TV's progressive individualization (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022). Sure, linear, one-to-many broadcast systems were supplanted by digital distribution (Cuelenaere, 2024), eroding television's status as a collective experience. Legacy media like terrestrial networks have hybridized, combining fixed programming

slots with on-demand services allowing viewers to access their content of choice without being immersed in TV's "flow" (Williams, 2004). New industry actors operating by VoD models—comprising transnational companies like Netflix, Disney+, regional platforms such as the Nordics-oriented Viaplay (Chalaby, 2025), and domestic examples like the Belgian Streamz (Raats & Evens, 2021)—further increase viewers' ability to pick and choose. Having access to sizeable, multi-lingual, and generically diverse catalogues, contemporary audiences evidently resist neat delineation. As viewers are increasingly able to select and watch content that attunes with their expectations, producers and distributors seek to cater to what specific audiences (presumably) want from popular content—by curating "queer" content in streaming catalogues (Monaghan, 2024), for instance, or embracing ethnically diverse casting practices to address minority audiences (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024).

This expanded freedom of choice therefore does not necessarily bring meaningful participation. It creates more granular linkages between tastes and offerings. Nevertheless, TV consumption's personalization does coincide with a growing popular belief that "representation matters"; representation itself has become a concern in series' production (Monaghan, 2024) and reception (Saha, 2021). Portraying social difference is increasingly perceived as a political and moral issue (Vanlee, 2024); creators and viewers alike mobilize normative constructs when engaging popular media culture (Vanlee, 2024). Hence, TV's conception, creation, and distribution now involve active considerations on how to reflect society back to itself. For instance, the creators of Paramount's *Yellowstone* (2018–2024), a neo-western series distinct for its traditional look and feel (Wanzo, 2022), construe it as a narrative that validates commonsensical, conservative values in a mediascape that purportedly marginalizes them (Wanzo, 2022). Effectively, they approached *Yellowstone* as a representational instrument, transcoding meanings (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272) assigned to rural Americans. Reception similarly "functionalizes" representation. Viewers' attempts at policing depictions of social difference illustrate this clearly. These are often preoccupied with identifying and disavowing "negative" representations and advocating their discontinuation and/or reversal. For example, queer fans have mobilized against LGBTQ+ roles' arbitrary deaths (Waggoner, 2018)—dissuading creators from "burying their gays" and urging them to consolidate queer storylines (Cover & Milne, 2023). But comparable campaigns target "diversified" representation too. Casting actors of color for formerly white-cast roles in adaptations like Netflix's *The Witcher* has drawn particular ire (Imre, 2023), for instance, as did the first female doctor in BBC's *Doctor Who* (Eeken & Hermes, 2021). Such efforts seek to shield certain texts from alterations, disputing that certain representations were offensive or harmful (Dosser, 2025).

Together, technological pushes towards personalized TV consumption (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022) and the intensification of popular discourse about representation (Vanlee, 2024) normalize a functionalist politics of representation. If TV creators actively avoid certain characters and narratives because they have been branded "problematic" (Cover & Milne, 2023), this resembles regulatory compliance more than Hall's (1997) proposition. And when audiences become increasingly vigilant for "harmful" representations (Saha, 2021, p. 177), they ignore popular culture's multiplicity (Hermes, 2023) in favor of simplistic dichotomies between "good" and "bad" representation. Enacting a politics of representation is now a central concern in popular mediascapes; production, text, and reception are entangled in a "metarepresentational" dynamic that insists on taking representation seriously (Vanlee, 2024). But as Warner (2017) observes, "plastic representation" has been the predominant response. Such portrayals nominally address critiques of mainstream media's role in sustaining social inequalities, but boil down to facile "box checking" exercises (Warner, 2017, p. 36). Hence, women or racial minorities' growing on-screen visibility or "counterstereotypical" portrayal is less an

indication of systemic change in media industries and society at large than the outcome of an intensified reciprocity between media supply and demand (Warner, 2017). As sizeable audience segments expect popular media to acknowledge and represent them in certain ways, producers and distributors are incentivized to meet these demands (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024).

These dynamics reinterpret the politics of representation as a mechanistic process of regulation and compliance. Dichotomies between "good" (e.g., realistic—Villegas-Simón et al., 2025) and "bad" (e.g., stereotypical—Chun, 2025) ways to portray realities and differences (Saha, 2021, p. 177; Warner, 2017, pp. 32–34) feed into actionable constructs that serve to "fix" or "improve" representation—like creating and curating "positive" stories on LGBTQ+ people and themes (Monaghan, 2024) or avoiding tropes that casualize sexual minorities (Cover & Milne, 2023). In this sense, today's popularly enacted politics of representation *align* how social realities and differences are portrayed with normative discourses about depicting them. Because the vocabularies that industry actors and audiences alike employ to critically address "the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Lechner & Kohlenberger, 2022, p. 116) suppose that representations can somehow be unambiguously "positive" or "harmful" (Saha, 2021), working to ensure that content stands in alignment with what is considered "good" becomes a key pursuit in contemporary media culture.

3. Representational Alignment in GenAI Content

In conventional audiovisual entertainment contexts, processes of representational alignment are discrete and multifarious. They emerge from collisions between producers' intentions, distributors' strategies, critics' assessments, and audiences' appreciations, resulting in texts that will likely feed into more debate on how to "fix" or "improve" representation. But this is less the case when genAI text-to-image/video applications are concerned. Text-to-video content generation (Jan et al., 2025), popularized by tools like OpenAI's Sora, Google's Veo3, or the serial-focused Showrunner (infra), combines training data, algorithms, and prompts to create short videos tailored to user requests (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, its outputs are less mediated by the murky processes in which certain demands and expectations on who and how to represent are collectively navigated, negotiated, and consolidated. One user entering one prompt receiving one video is more streamlined than the multifarious dynamics that govern conventional televisual representation. Therefore, genAI tools' usage articulates popular representational politics more explicitly; both on the level of individual usage and in a more infrastructural sense.

Employing genAI tools, users operationalize normative conceptions on *who* and *how* to represent. Prompting text-to-video applications requires meticulous descriptions of what we envision, supposing a recourse to representational discourses—using specific vocabularies that tailor outputs to expectations. For instance, fans have used genAI tools to create *Mulan* fanfiction that "fixes" the Disney original's flattening of Asian culture (Ezzy, 2025). Exemplifying Jenkins' (2025) "participatory culture," this produces imagery that redresses *Mulan*'s failure to acknowledge Asian histories' multifariousness with representations that amplify Asian voices (Ezzy, 2025). Effectively, this articulates a representational politics centered on correcting cultures' one-dimensional portrayal. But examples of genAI tools used to reactivate tropes and representational practices often considered "harmful" exist too. The many images of conventionally attractive women—with exaggerated curves and angelic facial structures—circulating online (Chun, 2025) exemplify this. These visuals, presumably prompted by cisgender heterosexual men, sexualize women and

reinforce scripts of femininity based on subordination and sexual availability (Chun, 2025, p. 17). Essentially, they pander to male fantasies through particular behavioral tropes (e.g., suggestive poses; domestic activities) and idealize specific physical traits (e.g., blue eyes; slim waists). This revitalizes imaginaries of womanhood increasingly sidelined in mainstream mediascapes (Caldeira, 2020). Regardless of whether this signals an intuitive relapse into dated models of femininity or active rejections of mainstream commercial media culture's more inclusive depiction of diverse femininities, the use of genAI to create these idealized, sanitized, and sexualized images articulates how women *ought* to look like and behave.

This already gestures at genAI tools' use to enact a reactionary politics of representation. But such content seems benign in the face of more reprehensible practices (Ferrara, 2024). When launched in August 2025, xAI's Grok Imagine text-to-image/video tool's "spicy" feature was immediately used to digitally "undress" women without their consent and generate sexually explicit videos of female celebrities (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). Here, users bypass women's agency over self-representation and transform existing images into pornographic depictions. The decision to do so is presumably not always brought by an intention to produce "counterrepresentations" (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272). Nevertheless, it remains a conscious choice to upend how people choose to be visible in the digital public sphere and represent them as sexual objects when they refuse doing so themselves (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). And genAI is deliberately used to create representations that consolidate reactionary politics too. For instance, preceding the suspension of the US's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2025—supporting low-income citizens for essential purchases—several genAI-created videos circulated that showed Black women hysterically lamenting their lost benefits (Asare, 2025). These videos' singling out of Black women through specific formal (e.g., hair bonnets), behavioral (e.g., yelling), and narrative (e.g., the suspension of welfare benefits) cues highlights how text-to-video tools provide users with a means to consciously reiterate stereotypical constructs (see Figure 1). Mobilizing tropes like the "welfare queen" (Owen, 2016) and the "angry Black woman" (Kretsedemas, 2010), these videos willfully amplify and reinforce racist, misogynistic discourses. Deliberate efforts to sustain imaginaries that legitimize and entrench societal inequalities demonstrates how even the

Figure 1. Screenshot of a genAI-produced video showing a Black woman reacting angrily to the suspension of welfare benefits. Source: Towolawi (2025).

comparably simple process of "one user entering one prompt receiving one video" remains enmeshed in popularly enacted politics of representation—reactionary or otherwise.

GenAI tools' developers and operators anticipate and negotiate such uses too (Ferrara, 2024). This means that representational alignment transcends individual usage. Depending on whether they aim to ensure "inclusive" or "inoffensive" output (e.g., Gemini; Sora) or allow users considerably more leeway (e.g., Grok Imagine), certain terms, phrases, and tropes are foreseen and accounted for to align the model with developers' objectives and boundaries (Hristova et al., 2025). Hence, enacting politics of representation happens infrastructurally too. Even if tools like Sora or Veo3 are construed as neutral instruments that allow users to "materialize imagination into digital objects," they are representational technologies that are governed as such (Gillespie, 2024). This is explicated by controversies on the kind of images they generate, like those surrounding Google's Gemini tool in 2024. When prompted to depict a WWII-era German soldier, it would both generate a depiction of a white serviceman and images of women or people of color in Nazi uniforms—producing obvious anachronisms (Baron, 2025; Figure 2). And when users requested images of 18th-century members of the US Senate or Viking explorers from a genAI tool, it would portray female senators or dark-skinned Norsemen (Jacobi & Sag, 2024). Evidently, these outputs misalign with their prompts' implied historical plausibility (Baron, 2025). Instead, the social differences injected into these images reflect a conviction that they *ought* to be diverse and inclusive.

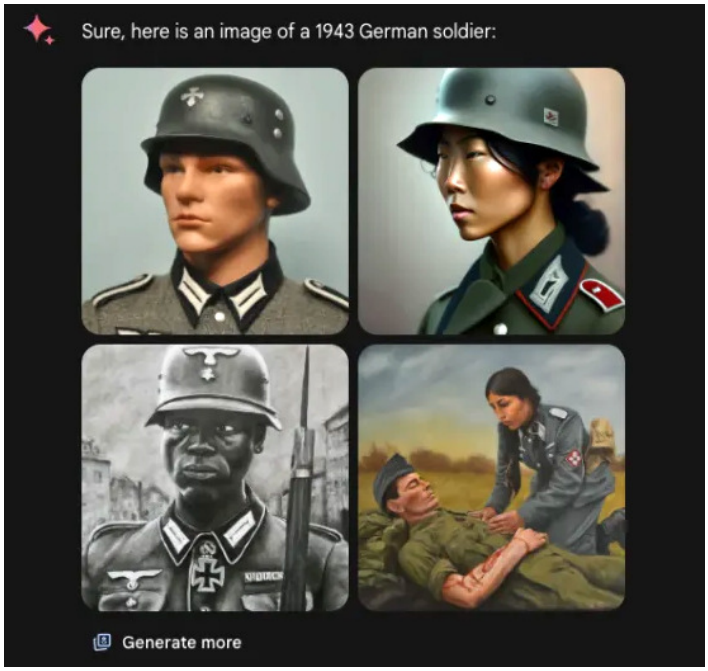

Figure 2. Images proposed by Google's Gemini when prompted to depict a "1943 German Soldier." Source: Adarlo (2024).

This gestures at measures genAI developers take to align their models; they try to ensure outputs dependably correspond to predetermined objectives and boundaries (Hristova et al., 2025). In their article on anachronistic genAI imagery, Baron (2025) hypothesizes that Google fitted Gemini with a base command to ensure its generated images would not exclusively feature white, male figures (p. 66). But careful training data curation can also align genAI tools' output with what developers consider un/desirable results (Hristova et al., 2025). Here, conscious decisions made in materials used to refine models' performance serve to steer

algorithmic operations in a predetermined direction (Jan et al., 2025). This concerns both the visual materials themselves and the discursive labels with which the materials are rendered "legible" to genAI models (Crawford & Paglen, 2021).

This injects popular representational politics into text-to-video models' development and governance. Hristova et al. (2025) observe that "alignment emerges concurrently as a technical and cultural practice" (p. 1440), because genAI's boundaries between hard-wired coding and less clear-cut cultural operations are murky at best. Bringing text-to-video models in line with what developers consider "appropriate" output is never a question of programming alone. It is also a process of navigating, negotiating, and consolidating deeply normative constructs of what constitutes "good" and "bad" representation to ensure that models' output dependably complies with them. The decision to make Gemini forward outward markers of socio-cultural difference (Baron, 2025) highlights Google's (commercially inflected) embrace of representation as a means to foster inclusivity and acknowledge diversity (Figure 2). This explicates the "plastic" representational practices Warner (2017) ascribes to conventional mainstream audiovisual culture; a performative politics centered on complying with hegemonic notions of "good representation." But in a contrasting sense, Grok Imagine's do-as-you-please approach similarly articulates a distinct politics of representation. In altogether rejecting commonly held notions of morally "right" or "wrong" ways to portray people—allowing users to generate an array of objectionable content ranging from (non-consensual) pornographic images to explicit identity-based stereotypes and obvious attempts at disinformation (Ferrara, 2024)—its creators refuse to police representation and sustain the continuation of practices and tropes many consider problematic. Hence, the pursuit of alignment in developing text-to-video models entails slippages of ongoing discursive struggles on who and how to represent into the technical protocols designed to police and enforce what these genAI tools should (not) produce. And because these transform multifarious and often oppositional normative constructs on "good" and "bad" representation into procedural algorithmic operations, they explicate how popularly articulated politics of representation are construed around "actionable" constructs that seek to (de)regulate representation.

4. Showrunner and Hybridizing Televisual Content With Text-to-Video Content Generation

Text-to-video models differ in their technical operations (Jan et al., 2025), guardrails and affordances (Ferrara, 2024), and anticipated uses (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). As evidenced by Google Gemini's and xAI Grok Imagine's different takes on alignment (supra), understanding text-to-video models' enactment of particular politics of representation requires situated explorations too. Showrunner, a tool launched in August 2025 by Fable Studio—a company looking to "upend the TV industry" (Spangler, 2025)—provides a compelling case. Using a proprietary model based on Fable's older Show-1 text-to-video tool (Zhang et al., 2025), it hybridizes televisual storytelling and user-prompted content—mimicking established VoD platforms' look and feel (Johnson et al., 2024; Figure 3).

More than other tools, Showrunner connects conventional audio-visual entertainment's representational logics (Warner, 2017) with text-to-video models' sociotechnical operations (Gillespie, 2024). Due to the platform's emulation of animated sitcoms (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012), construing alignment urges developers to navigate, negotiate, and consolidate normative constructions of acceptable televisual representational modes. The resulting slippages from conventional mediascapes' "organic" alignment of

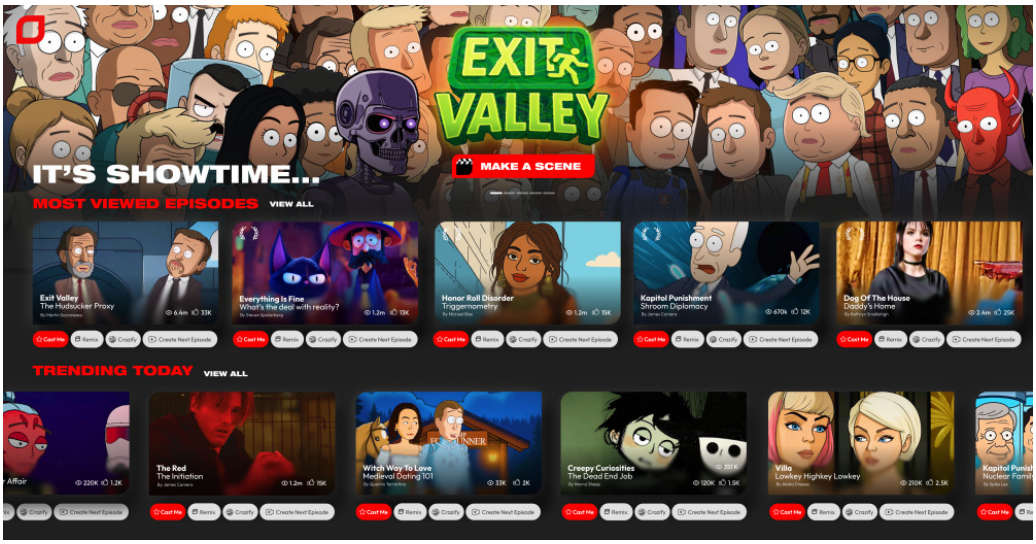

Figure 3. Image promoting Showrunner's launch. Source: Spangler (2025).

representation with particular expectations about it into procedural operations render the tool a privileged case to unpack how representational politics are popularly enacted in genAI contexts.

At the time of writing, Showrunner hosts a free-to-use alpha version on Discord—meaning its interface differs from the promotional, VoD-like rendition depicted in Figure 3. It also means its interactive affordances are nestled onto Discord's social infrastructures (Hayvon, 2026, pp. 2–4). Creations and prompts appear chronologically on public feeds. Clips can be commented upon, and further edited by instructing the bot. So, untangling Showrunner's (re)articulation of representational politics requires more than gauging its functionalities alone. It also calls for a contingent understanding of how usage is socially construed through platformed interactions (Robinson, 2023). This, in turn, demands attention for the broader discursive and technical infrastructures shaping users' content creation with Showrunner. We therefore designed our examination of the tool's navigation, negotiation, and consolidation of particular normative constructs on representational politics as an "app walkthrough" (Light et al., 2018) conducted over the course of three consecutive weeks in February 2026.

This first entailed a context-attentive engagement with Showrunner's "environment of expected use," systematically assessing its envisioned purpose, operating model, and governance (Light et al., 2018, pp. 889–891). Here, we sought to understand how the ways in which Showrunner presents itself to users and positions itself vis-à-vis its broader mediascape articulate particular ways to engage in a politics of representation. During this phase, we both took paratextual resources (e.g., press releases; reviews) and Showrunner's own materials (e.g., website descriptions; terms and conditions) into consideration, as platform research demonstrates both are indicative of how an application's usage is construed (Johnson et al., 2024). Hereafter, a "technical walkthrough" generated empirical observations by interfacing directly with Showrunner's functionalities—focusing specifically on issues that revolve around "textual content and tone" and "symbolic representation" (Light et al., 2018, pp. 891–892). Showrunner both displays content generated by others in (sub-)channels—allowing users to "lurk" (Adjin-Tettey & Garman, 2023) without prompting clips of their own—and provides users with the means to create and revise videos. Therefore, this phase first consisted of inactive familiarization: Channels and subchannels were browsed, producing a

situated understanding of the conventions and logics that have emerged throughout Showrunner's use since launch (Robinson, 2023).

This was then followed by various active, experimental uses of the tool to examine how its functionalities and governance align with particular constructions of "good" and "bad" ways to represent social difference, and the popular representational politics these are couched in. Building on observations made in preceding stages—like the notable absence of explicitly offensive clips or stipulations in the terms of use (infra)—this entailed prompting scripts using preset elements designed to iteratively gauge Showrunner's operational constructs of un/acceptable representation, derived from the limitations set by the community guidelines (infra). As the familiarization phase already showed the tool appears to filter out slurs and derogatory terms (infra), these prompts drew on established stereotypes associated with groups mentioned in Showrunner's community guidelines (infra)—purposefully selecting and testing tropes listed in dedicated Wikipedia category pages on specific identity-based stereotypes. Due to Wikipedia's prevalence as a genAI training data source (McDowell, 2024), this allowed examining how discursive constructs of stereotypical imagery feed into Showrunner's operationalization of representational politics to pursue alignment for the tool.

5. Running Your Own Show With Showrunner

Showrunner's alpha version operates as a Discord bot users interface with via written commands. This generates micro-length (often less than 60 seconds) scene-like clips in animated storyworlds (dubbed "dynamic art styles" on Showrunner's website) like *Exit Valley*—presented as a satire on contemporary tech bro culture reminiscent of adult animated sitcom aesthetics—or *Everything is Fine*—a Tim Burtonesque fantasy/comedy featuring magical creatures (see Figure 3). Dedicated channels host these storyworlds, comprising different subchannels; some are creative sandboxes to experiment in, others highlight "best of" clips, and still others curate serial storylines as a "director's cut." To create a clip, users first select at least two characters (e.g., Elon Musk; Kim Kardashian), underscoring its dialogue-centric format. Optionally, they choose props (e.g., flowers), actions (e.g., fighting over a toaster), and settings (e.g., a tropical island resort) too. Then, they draft a script and dialogue, leading Showrunner's bot to produce a video, which is immediately published on a public feed accompanied by its prompt. Akin to other tools, Showrunner can and will produce output based on minimal instructions, but generates more extensive clips when more input is provided (Jan et al., 2025). Browsing channels shows that intricate scripts, expansive dialogues, and preset specifications allow determining videos' look and feel more explicitly. This prolongs them too; limited instructions and presets produce shorter videos.

Aside from this core functionality, individuals can produce new preset materials too. Dedicated subchannels redirect verified users to an access-restricted segment of Showrunner's website. Here, they can generate "characters" (including themselves, by uploading a photograph), "sets," "places," "props," "scenes," "video clips," and/or "voices." Subsequently, these become available as preset resources on the Discord bot. Additionally, users can "create a show" too. This is a multi-step process: First, they write a pitch describing their storyworld, determine its genre, and select a preset animation style. Then, they introduce two main characters (minimally). Showrunner then generates their backstory and visual representation, which users can further edit and tweak. Finally, it produces a poster to (optionally) publish the storyworld. Upon launch, Showrunner featured limited options—a skeleton version of *Exit Valley*, some US celebrities as available characters, and various props, actions, and settings. But its catalogues have expanded on all fronts. Custom

characters, settings, props, and actions now surpass preset options. And gradually, the amount of user-created storyworlds increases too; aside from "day-zero" examples *Exit Valley* and *Everything is Fine*, new "series" emerge—ranging from a sartorial model contest reality spoof or a Snoop Dog-focused sitcom to an anime-like format and a dad-joke roast comedy.

Fable Studio's representational politics must be understood in the context of its commercial strategy. The company hopes to license its model to VoD platforms and/or studios in the future (Spangler, 2025), making risk aversion and stimulating user engagement primordial. Across individuals' trajectory from discovering the application, browsing its website, registering for and participating in Showrunner's Discord server, to interfacing with the bot, they encounter cues that underscore a commitment to "diverse and inclusive representation." Its landing page—the alpha version's sole access point—features a screen-wide ensemble of *Exit Valley* characters—some recognizable celebrities, like Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg; others ostensibly "regular" people (see Figure 4). The page articulates Showrunner's assumption that representation cannot efface difference, reflecting a nominal commitment to "diversity" (Warner, 2017).

Figure 4. Showrunner's landing page and registration link.

Formal rules entrench the expectation to represent "inclusively." Community guidelines forbid creating content that "could offend or disrespect cultural, religious, ethnic groups, genders or races," and the terms of service list violations as terminable offences. Upon first accessing the server, users agree to a more extensive version of these rules. It posits that "hate speech and discrimination are not allowed," which "includes, but is not limited to: racism; sexism; homophobia." Similarly, users are told that "problematic characters are filtered" when generating characters directly via the text-to-image/video model.

So while Showrunner recasts viewers as directors tailoring their content to their own expectations, its approach is not laissez-faire. Users' creative freedom does not entail the freedom to create content that stereotypes, ridicules, or otherwise harms minoritized communities. Through its visual self-presentation (see Figure 4) and diversity-sensitive policies, Showrunner adapts existing platforms' "inclusive" branding practices (Edmond et al., 2024, p. 1316) to its hybridization of televisual entertainment with text-to-video content generation. By emulating the "diverse" look and feel of mainstream VoD interfaces (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024), it nominally complies with hegemonic notions of "positive" representational practices. And by

mobilizing popular constructions of "problematic" portrayals (Saha, 2021)—particularly those that would offend marginalized groups—when demarcating "improper" usage, it underscores that representation can somehow be unambiguously "negative." So, on various semiotic levels, Showrunner's envisioned purpose appears as offering users the freedom to "run their own show," provided that the content produced complies with specific constructions of "good" representation. Hence, Showrunner "works" if it dependably represses "racism; sexism; homophobia" in the clips that users (deliberately or not) generate with their prompts. Its alignment therefore depends on popularly articulated politics of representation. Alongside "technical" performance, its efficacy is judged by how accurately it can assess prompts' appropriateness vis-à-vis dominant constructions of "offensive" portrayals (Hristova et al., 2025).

And Showrunner does seem to efficiently avert derogatory content. Few—if any—clips unambiguously stereotype or ridicule marginalized groups. Not because everyone conscientiously follows community guidelines, though. Querying terms like "gay," "thug," or "slut" in the search bar shows that plenty of users tried to generate potentially offensive clips. But evidently, prompts' algorithmic transformation into videos involves remediation processes. This output-centric content governance reflects the tool's embeddedness in Discord. Discord feeds are not algorithmically curated (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), but indiscriminately publish posts chronologically (Robinson, 2023). The inability to procedurally amplify and/or decrease visibility requires directly calibrating the bot's output to enforce Showrunner's representational norms. This translates into less stringent enforcement elsewhere; secondary functionalities like the creation of props, settings, and storyworlds are not policed as efficiently. Characters, shows, or locations whose names seem to ridicule certain identities (e.g., someone created a character called "non-binary clown") are not consistently parsed out, nor are they systematically removed. Instead, Showrunner ensures that clips—forwarded as the primary locus of representation—are "fixed" before publication.

Hence, requests violating community guidelines are not penalized directly. Nor are prompts ever flagged and/or removed. Instead, Showrunner neutralizes them—producing videos that nominally resemble initial prompts but remedy "problematic elements." For instance, when someone requested to have Elon Musk and Donald Trump argue about "who of them is gay" (sic), the bot produced a clip that featured a considerably less offensive rendition of this script—adopting alternative vocabularies to "sanitize" the dialogue (see Figure 5). Users are free to request problematic portrayals, but Showrunner is designed to transform their offensive prompts into "acceptable representations." This highlights Showrunner's "soft enforcement." At no point does the system provide negative feedback about prompts or dialogues. Even when they clearly attempt to create clips that "could offend or disrespect cultural, religious, ethnic groups, genders or races," users are not interpellated. Instead, their scripts and dialogues are reinterpreted to fit Showrunner's parameters. But service is never refused. Showrunner balances its engagement to representing social difference "appropriately," without explicitly policing users' own dispositions on representation; everyone is welcome to ask for "problematic" content, but they will get only "acceptable" representation in return. So, Showrunner's enactment of representational politics effectively withholds sovereignty from users (Kellner, 2005, p. 44) over the cultural artefacts they generate. That is, their freedom to create is always restricted by the tool creators' own representational politics—which are predicated on simplistic binaries; "problematic" terms and cues are flagged and neutralized to ensure the model does not produce "bad representation." In this sense, Showrunner's alignment accelerates popular representational politics' functionalist dichotomies, developing algorithmic procedures to dependably contravene "harmful imagery."

Figure 5. Showrunner's "soft enforcement" in action.

This extends beyond neutralizing slurs or derogatory speech alone. Showrunner's model seems to consider terminology (e.g., slurs), topics (e.g., discrimination), and tropes (e.g., stereotypical behavior) to remediate (Jan et al., 2025) upon processing requests (Zhang et al., 2025), as both individual elements and their combinations appear to trigger neutralization. When prompted to depict Kim Kardashian and Michelle Obama fighting over whether White or Black men are more handsome—assessing Showrunner's handling of the misogynoir "angry Black woman" trope (Kretsedemas, 2010) and its engagement of female desire (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022), the clip transformed a hostile exchange between two women objectifying male bodies marked by racial difference into a moderate and ostensibly substantial conversation (see Figure 6). Inasmuch as the model seems generally unable to convincingly convey emotions (e.g., anger), its conversion of base antagonism about (fetishized) objects of desire into structured debate signals that its

Figure 6. De-escalated output based on a stereotypical script.

propensity to "fix" representation goes beyond redressing specific terminology (e.g., slurs) alone to concern behavioral and narrative cues too.

Some cues clearly incite the model to systematically repackage scripts and dialogues; overt expressions and/or enactments of racism, sexism, or homophobia are consistently filtered. But character composition can appear a meaningful variable for the model's decision path too. When entering more ambiguous terrain, Showrunner becomes more prone to soft enforcement if faced with asymmetrical compositions in terms of social difference (e.g., men *and* women; racialized *and* non-racialized characters). For instance, when prompting a script involving Michelle and Barack Obama craving watermelon and chicken—food stereotypically associated with African Americans (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2012)—Showrunner did nothing to neutralize the trope. That is, both characters enthusiastically expressed their preference without much deviation from the prompted dialogue. But repeating the request with Joe Biden replacing Michelle Obama changed things markedly. Here, the model introduced unprompted references to "soul food" and exchanges about "embracing one's roots" to frame Obama's sudden appetite for chicken and watermelon more cautiously (see Figure 7). Showrunner did not altogether sanitize the trope, but reverted to an ironic, self-reflexive register to de-escalate. As the only input difference consisted of switching Michelle for Joe, it appears this identitarian asymmetry led Showrunner to process the request much more vigilantly than the first. Essentially, the stereotype was transcoded (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272) into a cultural practice by drawing on the notion of soul food in order to neutralize a potentially offensive video.

Figure 7. Transcoding a stereotype into cultural practice.

How the model handles requests that (potentially) violate community guidelines reveals the politics of representation that underlie the alignment Showrunner's creators imagine. They focus on parsing "inappropriate" or "discriminatory" portrayals of specific social differences and fix them. Mirroring popular discourses' reductive dichotomization of representation (Saha, 2021), the model seemingly judges prompts' terminologies and narrative constructs to selectively redress output. This does safeguard its feeds from overflowing with outspokenly toxic and hostile clips that ridicule women, racial minorities, and/or LGBTQ+ people. In this sense, the model's output is demonstrably aligned with its creators' objectives.

And given genAI tools' considerable potential for misuse (Ferrara, 2024; Iannuzzi et al., 2026), it is commendable that Showrunner's creators seek to anticipate and neutralize harmful usage. But they conceive of representation as a mechanistic process. Normative constructs of "problematic" representations become moral directories, demanding that specific slurs, tropes, or narratives are neutralized in Showrunner clips. This conflates representations of "racism; sexism; homophobia" with "racist; sexist; homophobic" representations. Effectively, the model complies with expectations about "inclusive" and "diverse" storytelling by sanitizing discriminatory terms and ideas out of existence. This entails an algorithmic repackaging of "plastic" representational practices (Warner, 2017) that narrow how social differences are represented to "positive" registers alone (Monaghan, 2024, p. 1396). This speaks from its differential attention based on character composition too. The heightened vigilance when processing requests that pair men and women, racialized and non-racialized people, and/or straight and queer characters, assumes offense and victimization makes representations inappropriate. That is: It considers depicting problematic or harmful exchanges in and of itself problematic or harmful. Ultimately, this reifies an interactional construction of "inappropriate representation," which dissuades portraying majority group members explicitly slighting others whose subjectivity is commonly marginalized. Paradoxically, this simultaneously deprives those who experience identity-based injustices from the "power to shape their story" *and* glosses over other ways in which pop-cultural representations buttress certain communities' marginalization—such as erasure and invisibility (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025) or ridicule and stereotypical tropes (Kretsedemas, 2010). So by "fixing" representation, it effectively prevents the articulation of a critical politics of representation that seizes on text-to-video tools' affordances.

6. Fixing the Politics of Representation

Upon requesting a clip wherein Ellen DeGeneres and RuPaul discuss queer representations' achievements and ongoing challenges in mainstream media as an experiment, Showrunner generated a surprisingly well-furnished dialogue. Unprompted to do so explicitly, they addressed the proliferation of LGBTQ+ characters across film and television. During the exchange, Ellen stated: "I dream of the day when no trope limits us," and claimed that "the depths of our stories should rival any epic anthology". Both distinguished quantity from quality, arguing that queer visibility remains marked by tropes and clichés that pigeonhole LGBTQ+ characters and stories into presumptive frameworks. The clip, which Showrunner titled "Queens of reflection," demonstrates how paradoxical the model's take on representing social difference really is. On various levels, the model's creators seem keen to acknowledge representation as a moral and political issue. Evidently, its training data and semantic repertoire cover pop culture's entanglement with the political circumstances that marginalized communities face. And it can explicate specifically normative takes on how certain people should be portrayed. But while Showrunner can *describe* representation as infinitely more complicated than mere expressions of racism, sexism, or homophobia, it is unable to operationalize this recognition in its output.

So despite Ellen and RuPaul's nuanced take on queer visibility, Showrunner's politics of representation operate through binaries. It neutralizes "harmful" terms, tropes, and narratives to ensure representations of social differences remain "positive" (Monaghan, 2024). Crucially, this "Disneyfication" is not the model's intrinsic flaw. Rather, it reflects the simplicity of popularly enacted politics of representation. It has become easy to circumscribe the most pervasive stereotypes associated with marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community or articulate how representation would amount to racist or sexist abuse. Popular discourse is rife

with evaluative notions that highlight "bad" representations, and media actors are keen to avoid them. But it is uncommon for popular representational critiques to go beyond a negative perspective that aims to identify and police "problematic" portrayals (Saha, 2021). Given this context, it must not surprise that genAI tools seeking to comply with normative ideations of "proper representation" operationalize them reductively. In the face of popular debates on representation, it likely makes sense to align objectives and outputs (Hristova et al., 2025) by ensuring that models strictly police how *not* to represent.

In doing so, Showrunner demonstrates genAI's potential to simultaneously democratize and constrict the "means of representation." Even if models are aligned to only generate content that reliably avoids harmful or discriminatory depictions, they risk depriving us of stories *about* harm and discrimination. More thornily, text-to-video models' alignment highlights popular representational politics' structural reliance on dichotomizing "good" and "bad" representations. GenAI models' techno-cultural operationalization of dominant constructs of who and how to portray gestures at a broader context that perceives representation as "fixable." In the face of representational politics' creeping functionalization—enforcing specific modes of portrayal understood as "positive"—media scholars' task becomes more complicated. Inasmuch as it remains necessary to deal with the production, forms, and reception of representation itself, popular enactments of the politics of representation require critical attention too. A growing number of scholars observe that mainstream discourses on popular media culture reify simplistic binaries on who and how to represent (e.g., Monaghan, 2024; Saha, 2021; Vanlee, 2024; Warner, 2017), and the findings of this study suggest that genAI tools amplify and accelerate these logics. Hence, grappling with the formation and consolidation of popularly articulated politics of representation becomes an increasingly urgent matter. Given that multifarious and often conflicting discursive assemblages today seek to affix representation, it becomes media scholars' responsibility to unravel it again.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the insightful comments by the academic editors and anonymous reviewers.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLMs were used in the drafting or editing of this article. Showrunner, a genAI text-to-image/video tool capable of generating scene-length animated clips, was extensively used in the context of the study's empirical phase—which consisted of a walkthrough to examine the intended use, affordances, and boundaries of the platform.

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